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Txt msg n English Language Literacy

Maryam Tayebinik^a*, Marlia Puteh^b^a*Faculty of Education , Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310, Johor, Malaysia*^b*Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpurs, 54100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

Abstract

This study investigated the students' perspective on the use of abbreviations or textism in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and the effect of such practice on the students' English language competence. Forty undergraduate students from different academic programs participated in this study. These participant volunteers were interviewed in a semi-structured face-to-face interview. The analysis of data indicated effective factors in the use of textism as well as its impacts on university students' English language proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Textism can be considered as the fastest growing style of electronic communication which is regularly used in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Textism refers to the use of abbreviations and other techniques to compose SMS and instant messages [1]. Today, extensive use of abbreviations such as “tq” for “thank you” or “nite” for “night” in CMC has become a common language and such abbreviations generally do not conform to the standard English rules in writing and spelling. The words are apparently misspelled and Plester, et al. [2] referred to such an act as ‘intentional misspelling’. According to Vosloo [1], this is largely due to the proliferation of mobile phones as well as internet based instant messaging (IM). In other words, technology is considered the origin of such a phenomenon. In this regard, Prensky [3] stated that applying such a language is

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60-142347124

E-mail address: ttayebi@gmail.com

peculiar to the 'Digital Native' generation who grow up with the technology. Offering another term for this group, Rosen et al [4] believed that the 'Net Generation' has embraced textisms as shortcuts when communicating via electronic communication.

Such an epidemic writing style has drawn the attention of researchers as well as teachers to investigate the effect of this phenomenon on the students' English language literacy. Several researchers blamed textism and termed it as an unfavorable phenomenon due to its harmful consequences to the students' writing composition. Lee [5] for instance, described textism as an ongoing attack of technology on formal written English. Humphrys [6] criticized it more strongly and described textism as a type of vandalism that is gradually destroying the language. He believed that texting is "pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences and raping our vocabulary and they must be stopped" (p.1). Holding the same belief, Vosloo [1] disapproved of texting and considered it as the origin of language corruption and spelling poverty of youth writing. Similarly, Uthus [7] emphasized on the deterioration of writing ability in English and added that the main criminal behind such a bad progress is text messaging.

To date, many researchers have concentrated on the effect of textism on language proficiency by investigating the written texts or offering theoretical arguments on the phenomenon. However, widespread applications of textism among students have revealed the need for research investigations on the application of textism and its impact on students' English language proficiency. Toward this end, this study aimed to investigate the perspective of the students on the use of textism in CMC and the effect of such a practice on their English language competence.

2. CMC and the Emergence of Textism

According to Crystal [8], CMC refers to any written messages sent via the Internet across a distance. This includes both email and computer conferencing and short text messaging (SMS) which is normally transmitted through mobile phone connections. Likewise, Baron [9] defined CMC as any language messaging that is usually a written message once transmitted and/or received by a computer connection. Baron [9] exemplified email and chat as CMC variations and believed that they can be considered as language of the Internet.

Nowadays, many forms of CMC have been created due to the growing application of the Internet for communication. Romiszowski and Mason [10] stated that "CMC is a generic term now commonly used for a variety of systems that enable people to communicate with other people by means of computers and networks" (p. 397). Jones [11] believed that CMC is not only a technological tool but also an avenue for social relations. The most important medium to enter this social community is through the application of IM, Email, Chat, and SMS which have become a routine application for the users in the social community [12].

CMC has been classified as synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication. In synchronous CMC, the participants are online at the same time while in asynchronous CMC, the participants are not simultaneously online. Okuyama [13] listed Internet Relay Chat (IRC), other web based chats as well as oral-visual based video-conferencing as examples of synchronous CMC. On the contrary, Email, weblogs, and online discussion boards are examples of Internet based, time-and-place independent written CMC that are referred as 'asynchronous' communication.

The language used in CMC often contains non-standard features of written language and such language forms are intentionally used by the users to reduce attempts on typing, provide evidence of creative expressions or imitate the features of spoken language [14]. The short forms of words (e.g. I don't know), lack of capitalization (e.g. i), omission of vowels (e.g. r), incorrect spellings (e.g. nite), replacement of numbers for words (e.g. gr8), simplified contractions (e.g. cuz), initials (e.g. lol for laugh out loud), subject drop (e.g. am doing), typing letters for homophone words (e.g. c u), and miscellaneous abbreviations (e.g. tq, ok, n) are special characteristics of textism that have been an epidemic among CMC users [14].

Other than that, some typographic varieties are used in textism in order to convey the feelings of the interlocutors. These typographic varieties include the use of exclamation marks (e.g. Yes!!) to express excitement and the use of capitalization of words to show emphasis (e.g. SURE). Okuyama [13] further added that CMC users use acronyms to demonstrate verbal as well as nonverbal symbols such as LOL (laughing out loud). Alternatively, “emoticons” or “smileys” are applied extensively to show the emotion or reaction of CMC users. Emoticon or smiley refers to the combination of punctuation marks such as :) or ☺ and :(or ☹ that resemble facial gestures to express sadness, happiness, frown, and surprise [13].

Researchers and teachers have criticized that textism branches off from standard written language. Tagliamonte [12] alarmed that variations in text messages reflects the expansion of writing speech. Likewise, Carrington [16] believed that the application of text messages has become more widespread resulting in a new written form known as “text speak.” This phenomenon has been well-accepted whereby students rampantly use such a writing format in their formal writing. Lee [5] reported teachers’ frustration on students’ frequent use of typical textism in their writing assignments. The application of text versions of spoken English such as the ones used in chat forums, text messages and emails suggested a completely different language applied in the written assignments which according to Jarvis [17], such “evolution of language is surely set to continue unabated- like it or loathe it ”(p. 644).

3. Texting and Language Literacy

Extensive application of Texting in CMC has created a series of new words and symbols, causing researchers such as Mphahlele and Mashamaite [18] to argue on the possibility of developing dictionaries for SMS. Others warned about future revolutions in language because of the expansion of textism. Crystal [8], for example, believed that the Internet is moderately changing the language because of the creation of new lexical items. Moreover, Mphahlele and Mashamaite [18] emphasized that excessive exposure to the SMS language has a negative impact on the English language proficiency of the learners. This hypothesis tallies with Craig [15] who asserted that IM endangers youth literacy since it produces a series of undesirable patterns in reading and writing and such informal language use harms the students’ mastery of formal and standard literary skills [15].

Despite the negative connotation of textism to language learning, it is a novel phenomenon to be investigated. A series of studies in this field has dealt with the impact of technology on English language and the emergence of texting [19], usage of textism in formal and informal writing [4] and the relationship between textism and children’s literacy [2; 20; 21]. Nevertheless, tertiary students’ perceptions on the effect of texting on their language literacy have not been extensively examined.

Available findings on students’ perception on textism highlighted the negative effect of textism use in formal writing. Rosen et al. [4] discovered a negative relationship between the texting behavior and students’ formal writing skill of seven hundred and eighteen young adults aged 18 to 25 years old. In addition, Jonge and Kemp [22] reported a negative correlation between textism and Australian students’ reading skills, spelling and morphological awareness. The study involved fifty three undergraduate students aged 18 to 24 years and 52 high school students aged 13 to 15 years.

In a different study, Drouin and Davis [23] examined the effects of ‘text speak’ on the literacy of 80 college students. Even though, the effect of ‘text speak’ or according to them ‘shorthand abbreviations’ was not evident on the language literacy of the participants in their study, they predicted the strong influence of ‘text speak’ on youth literacy.

Textism has been investigated in different age groups of learners with different findings. Wood, et al. [24] conducted an investigation on the impact of text messaging on the literacy of 9 and 10 year-old children. The children were given first-time access to mobile phone and texting for ten weeks. The comparison of the pre-test and post-test of the students’ literacy skills indicated that text messaging on mobile phone has demonstrated a positive outcome on the students’ literacy especially the development of their phonological awareness. In another

study, Kemp and Bushnell [21] examined the relationship between literacy and textism of 86 children aged 10-12 years old. Participants completed some spelling tests and the results verified that textism did not affect the students' spelling aptitude yet enhanced their texting proficiency and literacy skills.

The reviews of related literature have highlighted the effect of textism on language literacy. This study, however, complements the existing literature by investigating university students' perception of the effect of textism on their language proficiency. This study aimed to fill this research gap by answering the following research questions.

4. Research Questions

- 1- What are the factors that influence the application of textism in CMC?
- 2- How does the use of textism in CMC affect the English language literacy?

5. Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative research design by using semi-structured interviews.

5.1. participants

The participants were forty undergraduate students comprising of 29 females and 11 males from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia who studied a range of different courses. They were between 20 to 23 years of age and all of them were applying English shortened words or textism in CMC such as chatting and SMSing.

5.2. Instrument

An interview protocol was developed for the qualitative study. Specific questions based on the research questions were prepared prior to the interviews.

5.3. Procedure

The student-volunteers experienced a semi-structured interview which was conducted face-to-face and lasted between 10-15 minutes. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview began with a discussion which served to ensure that the students have applied textism to a certain extent in CMC. During the interview process, the interviewer probed for the answers through follow-up questions.

5.4. Data analysis

A number of themes regarding the factors and issues in the application of textism in CMC and its effect on the vocabulary have emerged from the interviews. Data in the form of transcripts were coded and related themes were grouped under two main categories in order to answer the research questions (refer to Table 1). Individual interviews were numbered based on the participants' gender (B: boy and G: girl).

Table 1. Main themes extracted from participants' responses

Reasons for applying textism in CMC	The impacts of textism use on English literacy
Fast communication and time saving	A decline in formal writing
Simplicity	Speaking skills are also affected
Credit saving and low cost	Causing damages to the grammatical skills
A trend among youngsters	Confusion in vocabulary spelling

The following section further analyses reasons for textism use and its effect on language literacy. The participants' statements are analyzed in order to get better perspectives on textism as perceived by the university students. For the purpose of originality, the grammatical mistakes in the quotes are retained to ensure that the messages are well understood in the context of textism.

Reasons for applying textism in CMC:

a) Fast communication and time saving

One of the most important reasons that the interviewees mentioned for using textism in CMC is time.

B18: If I send a message faster I will get the answer faster too, that is why I shorten the words.

G27: I want [to] save the time for transferring information.

In this case, the students believed that via shortened words, their communication becomes faster and they can read and answer messages more quickly. Ras and Rech [25] called this phenomenon as 'immediacy' and explained that it is one of the characteristics of the Net Generation due to the hasty concentration on speed than on accuracy. According to Ras and Rech [25] this generation does a lot of multitasking and able to quickly shift from one activity to another, hence; their response times are shorter (e.g. answering to instant messages).

b) Simplicity

G21: we use abbreviated words since both typing and reading of messages is easier in such a way.

B10: Texting is simple and easy when the words are short.

The interviewees also indicated that 'simplicity' is one of the reasons that encouraged them to apply textism routinely. This finding is consistent with the study of Grinter and Eldridge [26] in this field which theorized that language abbreviations in text messaging have evolved in order to help make typing faster.

c) Credit saving and low cost

Another common viewpoint in applying textism refers to the lower cost of messaging. Users can send 160 characters in each SMS. Rather than sending several SMSs, shortening the words helps them to exchange more data within this limit. In other words, contractions and nonstandard spellings were specifically developed in order to reduce the length of words for fast and cost-effective text messaging [27]. The following quotes are some instances to confirm this claim.

B1: In such a way I can shorten a long message and pay low cost.

G3: I save my credit for more texting.

B5: It is cheaper since in one message more information can be transferred because they are shortened. But if I want [to] text them in full sentences and words I have to send more messages then pay more.

d) A trend among youngsters

Respondents also believed that using shortened form of words have become a trend among youngsters. This assertion was made by G9 and B27 who claimed that “*such a kind of writing is a fashion*”.

Vosloo [1] also discovered similar result and reported that textism is highly widespread to the extent that some viewed it as a kind of language register.

The impacts of textism use on English literacy:

a) A decline in formal writing

Students asserted that they unconsciously use abbreviated words in formal writing or during examinations despite admitting that textism is inappropriate for formal writing. The same result was reported by Drouin and Davis [23] who emphasized that texters (those who apply abbreviated words) and non-texters (those who do not use abbreviated words) believe that abbreviated words are unsuitable to use in formal written communication. Evidently, the data gathered from the present study showed that a majority of the students claimed that misspelling occurs even in formal writing and assignments due to the overuse of abbreviated words in texting messages, as mentioned by the following students:

B7: Usually I use ‘n’ for ‘and’ or ‘2’ for ‘to’ in my assignments or examination automatically.

G13: Sometimes I use signs instead of words in my assignments without thinking (e.g @ for ‘at’).

This tallies Vosloo’s [1] theory that informal textism is evident in learners’ formal writing assignments and demonstrated their inability to use proper language in specific contexts.

b) Speaking skills are also affected

The use of textism over informal conversations is going to be a common phenomenon too. The following quote is recorded from one of the interviewees.

B28: I use some abbreviations when I’m speaking. For example: Try to do it A S A P (instead of as soon as possible).

Apparently, conversations are shortened and users believe that this is due to the iterative use of such abbreviations in text messages. According to Tagliamonte [12] abbreviations, acronyms and misspelling of the words in CMC have influenced both the written and spoken language.

c) Causing damages to the grammatical skills

In textism, users usually omit subjects (e.g am reading), disregard capitalization (e.g i) or ignore the use of articles (e.g ‘internet’ instead of ‘the Internet’) and drop auxiliary verbs such as ‘do’ in questions (e.g ‘I know

you?’ instead of ‘do I know you?’). The following students also reported their weakness in applying Standard English grammatical structures in their assignments.

B16: Sometimes I forget to capitalize the first words in the sentences.

G19: Usually I forget proper punctuation in exams.

B5: Mostly I don't care about the correct form of tenses.

These results are in line with Uthus [7] who claimed that the use of shorter sentences, simpler tenses of verbs and little punctuation in these messages are evidence of a weaker consideration of correct grammar and spelling.

d) Confusion in vocabulary spelling

B37: When I'm writing formal texts I cannot remember the correct form of the words.

G11: Sometimes, I'm totally confused when I look for the original forms of the words.

The above quotes confirm that students are engaged in spelling errors as the result of their spelling confusion. According to them, these errors occur in writing as they cannot remember the right spelling and the confusion between the root words and the way the words are spelt.

6. Results and Discussion

This study examined forty university students' justifications on the use of textism. Their perceptions about the effects of textism on their English language proficiency were also obtained. All of the participants reported the use of text messages in CMC and confirmed its negative effect on their language proficiency. The analysis of data collected via semi-structured interviews revealed four main reasons for using textism. The first was the time saved when engaged in textism. Students believed that typing abbreviated words caused their communication to be faster. Hence, more messages are able to be exchanged. Secondly, they used shortened words to make both typing and reading messages easy and simple. Credit saving was the third factor for textism use. Participants argued that shortened words help them to decrease the costs of sending SMS. Lastly, textism is a trend by itself and its use is regarded as a kind of prestige among friends.

The impacts of textism in CMC on English literacy were classified into four categories. Textism has a significant impact on formal writing assignments. Not only that, it has also affected the way the students speak. Textism also damages the students' grammatical skill through the use of iterative omissions or incomplete structure of sentences. It also causes spelling confusion to the students when they have difficulties in recalling the correct form of the words.

One of the remarkable results of the present study is the fact that the abbreviations which are special to CMC scenario are presently common in oral conversations within the Net Generation. This phenomenon is the reverse of what happened in text messages i.e. using spoken features in written texts. This trend is highly related to the dynamic feature of the language and it is an inevitable occurrence. According to Tagliamonte [12] this language is a hybrid between speech and writing that represents a renaissance of a new linguistic system.

7. Conclusion

University students are rampantly using textism in CMC. They tend to communicate faster, engage in simple and cost effective instant messaging, and at the same time fit into the current trend among themselves.

The participants of this study were highly aware of the impact of textism on their English language proficiency. Textism has affected their formal writing, speaking, grammatical skills and spelling aptitudes. Moreover, overuse of shorten words has affected the students' formal writing style. They also use abbreviations when engaging in normal conversations. Nevertheless, the adoption of unstructured sentences in CMC has also shaped their grammatical skills in a negative manner and caused them confusion in their vocabulary spelling.

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